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AUTHOR Plucker, O. L.
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ABSTRACT

This paper, by the Superintendent of Schools in Kansas City, Kansas, addresses several broad issues in urban education. The social, economic, and educational environment in Kansas City, are outlined, and the composition of the Board of Education is described. Criticisms of typical Boards of Education are offered, and possible solutions for restoring the quality are put forth. Suggestions are presented in the following areas: (1) Board responsibility to constituents: (2) leadership: (3) funding and fiscal responsibility: (4) government regulations: (5) program development: and (6) programs for the disadvantaged. The paper concludes that integration of urban disadvantaged into the mainstream of American life should be the major concern of the urban educator. (APM)

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THE URBAN AGENDA

MEETING TOMORROW'S NEEDS TODAY

By

O. L. Plucker

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Presenter:
O. L. Plucker
Superintendent of Schools
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To discuss urban education today is dangerous business, especially if you intend to be honest, maintain your integrity, and if you know anything about it. It has been my experience that most of the pontifications on the subject come from people who are so far removed from reality as to be safely insulated from any consequences of their propositions. The courts, the justice department, the Department of Education, Congress, state governors, state legislatures, college professors, and an army of professional writers in every newspaper or magazine from Esquire to the Wall Street Journal have pat answers to the problems which they have never really had to solve. Indeed, they are perfectly free to cite a condition, describe it as a problem and propose a solution without ever really understanding the cause of the condition, without really being sure that it is a problem and without any concern for the consequences that may flow from their proposals.

So it is that as a person who is actively engaged as a superintendent in an urban area, I speak with some reluctance and hesitation. So that you may know the background and conditions which may affect what I say; I am completing my 19th year as superintendent in a district which is a slice of the urban core of Kansas City. Our enrollment is 49% white, 44% Black and 7% other minorities. It has declined by 30% in the last 10 years. About 64% of the students served lunches are on free or reduced price meals and our Title I allocation for 1980-81 is about $2,166,220. We have a relatively strong and somewhat militant teachers' union, NEA, and operate under a mandatory negotiation law which still leaves final action, after mediation and fact-finding, up to the Board of Education.

Our Board is a seven-member Board, elected at large, and currently composed of an M.D., a Black bank president, a minister, a pharmacist owner of three stores, an insurance agency owner, a housewife who is a former national PTA officer, and the operator of a small electric motor repair business. Obviously, not a typical urban Board.

We have been engaged in desegregation litigation with the Department of Justice since 1973, having had a long hearing in Federal District Court in 1975, review by the Circuit Court in 1978, and now we are waiting further decisions from the District Court following a Circuit Court remand based on decisions relating to Dayton and Columbus, Ohio.

Our city has been actively involved in efforts to provide housing opportunities for low income families and elderly so that we now have a significant portion of the population living in concentrations of low income family housing and another large segment in various forms of subsidized high-rise and other units for elderly. In more recent years, a portion of the low income housing has been occupied by enclaves of non-English speaking refugees and immigrants. With the exception of the neighboring district of Kansas City, Missouri, we are surrounded by vast areas of suburban developments which have a significantly different ethnic, socio-economic and cultural composition than that of the urban center.

I'm sure that those of you who are involved in education in urban centers recognize that we have much in common, while at the same time there may be wide variations in other conditions.

But enough of background, what is the urban agenda -- what are its needs and are there paths to be explored for solutions?

As I look back over more than 25 years as an observer of the urban scene, I am impressed with the drastic change and yes, I would call it deterioration, in the ability of boards of education to lead and govern the huge and complex venture we call urban education.

As a consequence of a number of elements, the qualities and characteristics and abilities of members of urban district boards have changed. But how have they changed?

First, the modern urban board member tends to be a visible vocal activist who seeks simple answers to very complex problems.

Second, the modern urban board member tends to be single issue or limited issue oriented.

Third, the modern urban board member tends to have little or no real background or understandings of the workings of complex corporate or social structures.

Third, the modern urban board member tends to represent a limited constituancy both with respect to geographical area and idealogy.

Fifth, the modern urban board member has little or no understanding of fiscal affairs as relating to financial management, public finance issues and the total local-state-federal relationships.

Sixth, the modern urban board member has little appreciation for or understanding of the complex personnel problems and the administrative relationships involved.

Seventh, the modern urban board member tends toward high levels of egocentricity but is, at the same time, highly defensive as a consequence of a recognition of limitations he prefers not to reveal.

Eighth, the modern urban member is a short-term officer, seldom elected or appointed for more than two terms.

Yes, I know, there are hundreds of able and dedicated members of urban boards of education. But if an investor were to consider the hugeness, the complexity and the importance of the total urban educational venture, and then contrast it with the competence, the vision and the understandings of its corporate board of directors, I think he would be forced to look for another opportunity or find a way to build a better board.

The simple fact is, of course, that the American taxpayer is the investor and there is no other game in town. There really is only one alternative. Urban centers are going to have to secure school board members who have the ability to comprehend and to respond to the broad needs of the whole and to put aside the special interests of the vocal promoters of personal goals and ego satisfactions. They are going to have to secure board members who can deal with hard issues and cut through the verbal garbage of an army of grant eaters, exploiters and bureaucrats. They are going to have to develop a tough skinned staff of competent administrators and supervisors, demand leadership and give it 100% support through thick and thin.

True, here and there we can point with pride at a special project or school built on the personality of a strong teacher or principal and the broad involvement of various community forces, etc. But taken as a whole, the abdication of boards of education and strong central administrative leadership and control of schools has resulted in little more than chaos.

But restoration of a board of education whose quality has all but vanished is not easy. There are, however, a few suggestions as starters.

First. School administrators and serious students of the problems in urban centers need to mount an effective campaign with news media, legislators, and whoever else may be of importance in changing the system to create conditions in which board members are responsible to all of the citizens of the district.

Whether they are elected or appointed may not be too important, but the growth of systems which fragment school districts into warring kingdoms each represented by some dumb dandy or vocal vera has got to go! It may well be that the ward systems of the 1890's which were revived in the 1960's and '70's can't be totally eliminated, but new systems to mitigate their inadequacies must be found.

Second and perhaps more important, mechanisms must be produced which will again stimulate and encourage the competent but non-combative individual who is truly concerned about educational welfare of the entire district to enter the arena. It may well be that the PTA, school administrators, and other strangers to the world of politics will need to band together to provide the support needed, for without it, few if any, top-notch candidates will surface in the contests for membership on urban boards of education.

A second major area of concern which I have observed during the past years is that of instability in urban schools.

Instability in finance
Instability in leadership
Instability in student desegregation
Instability in instructional programs
Instability in responsibility
Instability in enrollments.

While change and adaptation to new conditions are normal processes of life and essential to survival, the schizophrenic characteristics of urban schools must be put to an end if education is to proceed with any assurance of continuity and quality.

Let me be more specific. First with respect to leadership. In many urban systems, superintendents and top administrative officers of urban school districts have come and gone with such frequency as to raise the question of whether the district actually wants a superintendent or whether is just wants someone to make a few speeches and "front" for the board and the entrenched palace guard. But the fault lies as much with our profession as with the districts. It seems to me that by the time some of the recently elected superintendents get their chair warm, they are looking down the road to see if there might be a better job opening on the horizon.

I am convinced that few, if any, superintendents in major urban centers can have any really significant impact on a system in less than six or more years. Indeed, the hotshot who comes to the district with a bag full of answers to complex district problems often does little more than add to the burdens of an already over-loaded system.

Schools are no less sensitive to problems growing out of leadership change or lack of firm leadership than are the major business corporations of the city. As professionals, we have an obligation to provide strong leadership and that isn't going to be done by the transient interloper or the articulate opportunist. As professionals, we have an obligation to treat every job as a lifetime assignment and to give it long-term professional care.

For almost as long as the superintendency has been a part of public schools, it has been a position filled with varying degrees of transience. What I am suggesting is that if urban districts are to have the leadership and progress they deserve, superintendents are going to have to develop a different view of the job in terms of career goals. The urban superintendency within the specific system must be viewed as a career in itself rather than as simply a period of time in a career made up of a succession of superintendencies.

But superintendents aren't supermen and women. We need a foundation of financial support which is stable and adequate, but at the same time, we need to have the stamina to cut the suit to fit the cloth.

State legislatures, boards of education and town councils or other governing bodies responsible for decisions concerning the amount of money to be made available for education have an obligation to develop adequate revenues but in the last analysis, the superintendent, together with his staff, is responsible for the administrative recommendations that make or break the treasury of the urban district. I'm not going to cite any specific district, but the record is full of examples where the urban school superintendent and staff have caved in under pressure from teacher unions, maintenance workers, and community pressure groups and have acquiesced in decisions which put the district under financial strains for which its resources were totally inadequate. Let's face it, while the battle for financial resources has got to be continued, urban center schools can't continue to "bet on the come." No system can function for long in a deficit position and it is up to the superintendent and his staff to meet the situation head on including both all-out efforts with state legislatures and other funding agencies for adequate funding and a tough no nonsense stance for fiscal responsibility with those groups and individuals who have no responsibility and little concern for the future stability of the schools in the urban core.

When enrollments decline, buildings must be closed and personnel cuts must be made, realistic class sizes must be maintained and supply orders trimmed. When courts impose absurd and costly orders governing everything from the activity program to the hour of the day at which PTA meetings are held and the specific building each child shall attend, there must be a forthright statement of the costs involved and the compensating losses in service need to be implemented and so identified.

Let me shift for a moment to the instability and disruptions imposed on education in urban areas as a consequence of a loss of a rational approach to the subject of desegregation.

But first, let's put to rest any question about the validity of desegregation itself. No one in his right mind or with a little moral foundation is going to question the justice and rightness of the conclusions reached in Brown. Segregation is wrong, indefensible and to be destroyed, root and branch. Regrettably, in recent years the entire concept of desegregation has been warped into a mad nightmare in which children are treated as properties to be packaged, shipped, relocated and warehoused in a manner calculated to produce a chromatic montage with little or no regard to consequences in terms of the future of schools, cities, communities, education or children themselves. Forty years of federal housing policies, urban redevelopment programs, highway and freeway development programs and a mix of other well-intentioned social and economic programs have set in motion and continue to support an increasing division of urban populations on the basis of economic, social and ethnic characteristics. The evidence is clear that the harassment of children and families in an effort to hide that problem as it is reflected in the enrollment of the schools which serve the community has done little but accelerate the movement to private schools and the migration to suburban areas thought to be beyond the reach of irrational zealots.

Yes, I heartily support desegregated and, if possible, fully integrated schools, But part of the answer to urban school problems lies in putting an end to the uncertainty, the fear and even the panic which has gripped parents of children in urban centers. So long as we subject urban centers to the potential and real disruptions resulting from irrational desegregation demands brought primarily by the Department of Justice and by others whose long-term goals may well be the development of totally segregated urban centers, there

will be precious little real progress and stability in urban public schools.

I'm not aware of any short-range miracles which will resolve the fundamental ills of urban education, but I am convinced that if those schools, and indeed urban core areas themselves, are to survive as places where children can live and grow, there must be a national commitment to the reversal of those trends and policies which have made the urban centers the repositories for most of the social and economic problems of metropolitan areas.

It may not be the popular thing to say, but there must be a lifting of constraints on program development and operation so as to make it possible for schools in urban centers to be truly acceptable and attractive to economically advantaged and high ability level students. Expressed and implied prohibitions on educationally defensible grouping and special attention to high ability students when such programs do not fit the neat and sacred sex or ethnic ratios of O.C.R. must be eliminated if urban schools are to avoid further ghettoization.

I believe further, that there must be a radical reversal of the practice of concentrating programs for economically disadvantaged, under educated, socially disruptive, inadequately housed, and generally unstable family structures in such a manner as to rivet those problems into the urban core while stimulating further the evacuation of the area by the opposite end of the socio-economic and educational strata of society. That's not a job for school districts or local units of government, but a task with which public policymakers at the state and federal level must come to grips if an urban holocaust is to be avoided in the next decade.

Put bluntly, this is no time for bandaids or cosmetics. It is time that we seek an active national policy and commitment to permit and encourage the integration of the concentrated population of urban disadvantaged peoples

into the mainstream of American life. That includes the suburban and rural communities of America.

I hold no illusions about the short-range effects of such actions and would look forward to a period of drastic reductions in student resident populations of urban centers. But I would also look forward with hope toward a gradual repopulation with an economically, socially, educationally and ethnically cosmopolitan population.

Yes, I see tough times ahead on the urban agenda. I do not see simple answers, but I believe there is indeed a future. Tomorrow's needs won't be met today, but today is the day we must begin their resolution.